

Romance Keeps This Old Swindle Alive

By A FORMER CONFIDENCE MAN

Illustrations by J. Norman Lynd

of romance as other natures respond to more humdrum methods of getting something for nothing. Such natures keep the Spanish prisoner swindle alive in all its ramifications and variations.

This form of swindle has been going on for at least thirty-five years to the knowledge of the writer. Probably it is much older than that, for if one goes

"obits" from any and all parts of the country in quantities that vary only with the amount paid to said bureau for collecting the death records. It is surprising how many people get their names in the paper when they die.

Let us suppose that Anson B. Pepper, of Niwot, Colo., has died and Jeremiah W. Small is appointed executor of his estate. Mr. Small, in opening his friend Pepper's posthumous mail, finds something that puzzles him. It is a letter with a foreign postmark—Cadiz, Spain, most likely. The letter is couched in somewhat guarded language, but in effect it says that everything is rosy, that the writer has personally counted the \$275,000 in gold, and all that remains is to go and get the treasure.

per is dead, a fact the swindlers gleaned long ago from the obituary notice. His letter is sent to New York from Cadiz and is filed away by the swindlers as an exhibit to be followed up. Also Mr. Small's financial rating is looked up. It is found that he is a prosperous citizen, able to draw a substantial check.

In answer to Mr. Small's letter comes another missive from Cadiz, which gives him quite a start. This letter tells Mr. Small that his old friend Pepper had furnished money to outfit an expedition to recover a considerable sum of buried treasure—\$275,000 in all, as was afterward found out—which money would have been recovered but for unlooked-for circumstances, which are related in detail.

It seems that this expedition, outfitted by that incurable romanticist, the late Mr. Pepper, was highly successful right up to the final getaway. The treasure, which was in Spanish doubloons, had been located and dug up. The writer of the letter had counted the money over personally and it amounted to \$275,000. It was loaded on the boat which the late Mr. Pepper had outfitted, and the writer of the letter—a Spaniard, as his queer English would indicate—had set forth from the harbor on one of the Canary Islands, with nothing to do but pay off his crew and divide the profits with Mr. Pepper.

But at the mouth of the harbor, the writer goes on to explain, the tight little craft which represented the late Mr. Pepper's chief investment, was boarded by a belligerent and well armed crew from another craft, which seemed to come from nowhere. It was supposed that those who boarded the treasure craft were pirates. Acting on this assumption the defenders of the boat opened fire and drove off the boarding party. One of the supposed pirates was wounded in the shoulder. A brother of the letter writer was killed. Realizing the impossibility of escaping, the letter writer put the treasure craft about and re-entered the harbor. The treasure was buried again in another spot, and eventually the treasure seekers made their way back to Spain.

Here the leader, who writes the letter, was put under arrest, charged with resisting Spanish customs authorities. It seems that the supposed pirates were in

The treasure was buried again in another spot, and the treasure seekers went back to Spain

THE obituary notice as it appears in one's home town paper, whether one's home town happens to be New York or Snohomish, would not appeal to the average reader as an aid to one of the most elaborate and successful confidence games, yet such is the case. By utilizing "Death Notices" to their advantage crooks who have specialized in what is known to the fraternity generally as the Spanish prisoner swindle, have made many thousands of dollars from the pockets of men, who have been proof against every other method of attack, but who finally have yielded to the lure of romance.

For the Spanish prisoner swindle goes back in human consciousness to the Peter Pan in us that never grows up—the inner love of youth for the lure of buried treasure. It may be imagined by some that the boy who likes to read pirate stories and tales of treasure hunts puts away such things with his childish toys. Not so. Back in his brain somewhere there is something left, even when he is well along in middle age—something which catches fire at the very mention of buried treasure and burns as fiercely as the days when as a lad he got his first reading of "Treasure Island."

The success of the Spanish prisoner swindle is based upon the swindler's accurate knowledge of human nature—their laying up on this innate love of romance, which perhaps will not be acknowledged even by the person who has it in its most pronounced form. These swindlers know that outward appearance counts for nothing and that a man's standing and reputation in a community count for nothing against this primal lure. Outwardly and by reputation a man may be proof against all forms of swindles. He may be one who would laugh to scorn any confidence man who sought to approach him with three-card monte, the shells, the gold brick, fake bets on horse races, or any other time-honored method of diverting the gold of commerce from its customary channels, and he may be the first to fall for the Spanish prisoner swindle. It would take a psycho-analyst to tell why, and then perhaps the psycho-analyst would be wrong. But apparently there are natures that respond as readily to the call



The faithful leader of the expedition is now in prison in Cadiz, and Spanish Frank almost weeps as he tells about it

into the history of modern swindling operations he will be surprised to find how very ancient most of them are. The best operator of recent years is known as "Spanish Frank." He is really an Italian, but his dark complexion enables him to pass as a Spaniard—that and a very clever handling of the Spanish language. The last time I saw Spanish Frank, the Spanish prisoner game was dull, and he was in New Orleans selling little machines which manufactured ten-dollar bills. That is, they manufactured such bills under Spanish Frank's manipulation. He would put in some green paper and turn a crank, and out would come a crisp ten-dollar bill, which would pass anywhere for the very good reason that it was genuine. No wonder he could sell such a machine for \$300 or \$400. It turned out only the one \$10 bill, but by the time the purchaser went still-hunting for Spanish Frank that worthy was in some other quarter selling his little machines.

Obituary notices, as said at the beginning of this article, have played a large part in the successful operation of the Spanish prisoner swindle in recent years. Any press clipping bureau will supply

Mr. Small meditatively rubs the stubble of his beard a long time with the paper cutter. He cannot make as much of the letter as he would like. It is deeply mysterious—tantalizingly so. That is because it has hit the keynote of romance away back in Mr. Small's consciousness. He doesn't know it, but he is a boy again back in the old barn dreaming over the treasure stories which his dad told him he must not read.

Small determines to answer the letter and find out more about this treasure. So he writes, setting forth that Mr. Pep-



The letter-writer had counted the money over personally, and it amounted to \$275,000 and it only remained to go and get it